

**A HISTORY OF NANSEMOND COLLEGIATE INSTITUTE  
FROM 1890 TO 1939**

by

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## Abstract

The goal of this effort was to write the definitive history of a high school for Blacks in Nansemond County. The destruction of school records in the fires that eventually led to the closing of the school made that task difficult. While attempting the historical research, however, two factors were found which still make the effort worthwhile. First, there was a definite sense of pride found in all who had been associated with the Nansemond Collegiate Institute. This pride gave one the sense that attending Nansemond Collegiate Institute was almost as much an expression of freedom as it was an effort to secure an education. The second factor was the determination of the need for Nansemond Collegiate Institute based on the disparities in services offered to Blacks when compared to Whites in the public school setting.

Public education in Suffolk and Nansemond County, Virginia had its beginnings in 1871 when the first school boards were appointed for those localities. Nineteen years later, there still existed no secondary educational opportunities for the Blacks of Nansemond County. In order to address this lack, Blacks in the county pooled their resources and started their own school, Nansemond Collegiate Institute.

Founded in 1890, Nansemond Collegiate Institute provided for the elementary and secondary educational needs of Black youth in Nansemond County, Virginia for nearly fifty years. This school was a case study of local control and self-help. The school maintained a classical educational curriculum during the time when the Hampton Industrial Education model was being touted as the preferred model of education for Blacks.

Under the leadership of five principals, four of whom were ministers, the Institute demonstrated the power of a community to control its own destiny. The

Institute's supporters raised the funds needed to establish and run the school. It struggled for many years with funding and curriculum issues. The school's last principal, Mr. William Huskerson, arrived in 1926. He made several advances in terms of funding and building. His tenure, however, began just one year before the county established its first public high school for Blacks. This competition and a series of "suspicious" fires ultimately led to the close of the Nansemond Collegiate Institute. This closing did not occur before the Institute had opened possibilities for many Blacks who might not otherwise have had varied career choices. By having existed, Nansemond Collegiate Institute had a lasting impact on the lives of many Blacks of Nansemond County.

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## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION

In June 1939, the Nansemond Collegiate Institute officially closed its doors for the final time. This event marked the conclusion of a forty-nine year effort by Blacks in Nansemond County, Virginia to provide a quality education for their children. Although Virginia law had, by 1881, authorized several efforts that were to provide education for Blacks, including the establishment of the Virginia Normal and Collegiate Institute in Petersburg, Virginia, there was no public high school education available to Blacks in Suffolk as the nineteenth century drew to a close (Burton, 1970).

It should be noted that public education had its beginnings in Suffolk in 1871 when the first School Board was formed to provide an education for all of the students in the City of Suffolk and Nansemond County (Burton, 1970). There were scattered private academies and free schools for Whites but nothing for Blacks (Maguire, 1986). Seeking to ameliorate this lack, the Reverend William Washington Gaines opened the Nansemond Normal and Industrial Institute in 1890. Reverend Gaines was the pastor of the First Colored Baptist Church and it was from that base that he operated (Lowe, 1984).

The Nansemond Normal and Industrial Institute provided both an elementary and high school education to Black youth in the county who wished to attend. The school was supported by contributions from local Black churches of all denominations, tuition, and donations from patrons, including a few local Whites. The Institute was private only in the sense that no public dollars were used in its support or operation. The school



was very public in that no student was turned away from its doors regardless of the ability to pay the tuition.

Tuition ranged from five to eight dollars per month during the school's existence. There were times, however, when parents could not afford the tuition in cash. They were allowed to pay with livestock, vegetables, firewood, or the provision of services. These services might include cleaning or the lighting of fires for heat and cooking (E. Lowe, personal communication, July 1995).

Some students struggled to pay their own tuition. One student worked several jobs including a shoeshine business and a cleaning service for local businesses to pay the tuition for his sister and himself (H. Benn, personal communication, February 1997).

The name of the school was changed to the Nansemond Collegiate Institute when the "normal school" was added in 1930. The normal school was a teacher preparation program. It was accredited by the State Department of Education and authorized to issue professional teaching certificates (Journal and Guide, May 1930) .

### Need for the Study

This study is undertaken to provide a comprehensive historical account of one of the efforts of Blacks citizens in Nansemond County to provide an education for their children prior to this need being met by local government. This document should be viewed as a chapter in the not yet written history of education in the City of Suffolk. The study will chronicle the existence of the Nansemond Collegiate Institute during the period from 1890 to 1939. Nearly all school records were lost during

the series of fires which destroyed the school in 1933. It is a testament to the determination of the persons involved that the school continued to operate for six more years after the fires before finally closing in 1939.

The significance of this effort must not be lost. In 1984, a class reunion committee listed, in its reunion document, some of the historical events in the existence of Nansemond Collegiate Institute. Many of those recollections will be referenced in this document. This document will also attempt to put the evolution of the Nansemond Collegiate Institute into proper historical perspective.

The times during which the Institute operated were not amenable to educational opportunities for Blacks. Government agencies and other supposed benefactors used education as a tool for managing Blacks and for maintaining vestiges of slavery, if not the formal institution. The period of the school's existence was congruent with the great debate over the appropriate type of education for Blacks. One school of thought, including W. E. B. DuBois, argued for a more complete classical education (Lewis, 1993). This school of thought contended that a classical education was needed to properly train the minds of Blacks. DuBois and others suggested there existed here an untapped wealth of skill and ability. This mental training was seen as the means of uplifting Blacks from their post-slavery status, a status which found most Blacks at the bottom of both social and economic strata.

The opposing school of thought included the noted Booker T. Washington (Anderson, 1988). This school took the position that a practical education was needed to assist Blacks in adjusting to their

*proper* place in society. This practical education sought to teach Blacks to accept the status quo. The desire to have Blacks accept their place was based, in part, on assertions by persons like Samuel Armstrong. Armstrong was no stranger to Blacks. His personal history included the commanding of Black troops during the Civil War. His desire to improve the situation of Blacks was likely sincere and likely influenced by the work and lives of his missionary parents. Armstrong, founder of Hampton Institute and self-proclaimed friend of the Negro race (Anderson, 1988), promoted the position that Blacks possessed innate characteristics that made them ill-suited for intellectual pursuits and limited them to a subordinate role in American society. The practical education, therefore, had a heavy emphasis on vocational and industrial training.

Often ignored in this argument was that, regardless of the type of education received, there were limited opportunities for Blacks to apply any type of acquired skill (Spivey, 1978). Practical education was of limited value because jobs were not readily available or the skills provided were already outdated. A classical education was also of little value because of the limited arenas available to practice the philosophies which had been studied.

In 1933, Carter Woodson wrote his classic work "The Mis-Education of the Negro." The major thesis of this book is that no people would be adequately educated as long as they waited on others to provide the education. Although they acted forty-three years earlier, the founders of the Nansemond Collegiate Institute seem to have anticipated his advice. Blacks, in Nansemond County, established their

own elementary and high schools. They also added their own two-year college (Lowe, 1984). No matter the adversities faced, the founders held on to control of their dream of educating their children.

This local control allowed Blacks to determine the content and focus of their schooling. As a result, the emphasis of Nansemond Collegiate Institute was on a classical education, designed to train the mind and open possibilities (Lowe, 1984). Noticeably lacking was an emphasis on vocational and industrial training. In fact, the only concessions to vocational training were in the provision of Home Economics and an apprenticeship in the print shop that was a part of the school's financial support system (E. Lowe, personal communication, July 1995).

Those who graduated from Nansemond Collegiate Institute were generally well prepared for their subsequent schooling experiences. They found that four-year colleges accepted all of their credits from Nansemond Collegiate when they enrolled to complete Bachelor or Masters programs. This included schools as far away as New York University (M. Davis, personal communication, February 1997). Further, it was a point of pride for some graduates to have been able to study courses like Algebra, Religion, French, Latin, Biology, Trigonometry, Drama and Chorus at Nansemond Collegiate Institute (Lowe, personal communication, March 1997). Other graduates enjoyed the range of options available, such as the ability to choose between French and Latin (B. Wynn, personal communication, February 1997).

## Summary

This study was undertaken to record historical facts about and the ideals of the Nansemond Collegiate within a chronology of its existence. One purpose of this study is to preserve the history of the institution and create an interest in the readers of this document. The Institute was a testament to the efforts of the Black educational pioneers of Nansemond County, Virginia. Many graduates of Nansemond Collegiate Institute went on to successful careers in the segregated but later integrated Nansemond County and Suffolk City school systems. Others went on to successful endeavors in fields including law, funeral services, construction, medicine and religion (Russell, 1981).

It is hoped that this work will stimulate thoughtful conversation regarding the contributions this school made. Nansemond Collegiate is a case study in local control. The existence of the school demonstrated the power of a community to control its own destiny. When no high school education was available for their children, Blacks in Nansemond County, started their own school. The founders and administrators struggled financially but were able to keep the school open until 1939 (Lowe, 1984). There is no way, today, to know if the supporters of Nansemond Collegiate Institute knew how the acceptance of financial support from philanthropists like George Foster Peabody had changed the course of Fort Valley High and Industrial School, in Georgia, from its original classical educational program to an industrial one of the Hampton model (Anderson, 1988). It does appear they chose to struggle rather than surrender control of their curriculum to such

philanthropic influences.

It is not likely that racial discrimination will create the need for another Nansemond Collegiate Institute in America. The historical fact that it has happened does, however, prove that such a thing is possible. Studies of history provide examples of how other people at other times have handled similar problems. Historical examples provide possible paradigms for action when problems arise today.

PREVIEW